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Back in Business: Cost U Less on St. Thomas Opened its Doors Friday to Thousands of Customers 2 Years after Irma and Maria

Business / **Published On November 04, 2019 07:10 PM /**

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Cost U Less in St. Thomas By. Robert Moore for VI Consortium

ST. THOMAS -- Felt like normal again -- only happier and much more crowded than the last time shoppers patronized Cost U Less on St. Thomas two years ago.

On Friday, thousands of people turned up throughout the day for the first glimpse of the new Cost U Less warehouse, club-style store. It's been rebuilt after its total destruction in the twin Category 5 hurricanes in 2017.

"It was a blast. Happy, friendly people in the long checkout lines. They passed out water and cookies to people in line. We enjoyed the experience," " said Jane Bowers in her social media post afterwards.

Indeed. It was a long-awaited grand re-opening of a staple of St. Thomas retail big-box stores. Lt. Gov. Tregenza Roach spoke at the morning ceremonies. Music, vendor booths lined the sidewalks. And the St. Thomas-St. John community at large was a happy crowd.

People were lined up by 3 a.m. for the grand re-opening ceremonies four hours later. By mid-day the sprawling parking lot remained packed, with cars filling virtually every square-foot of grass along the service road from Weymouth Rhymer Highway to the nearby Home Depot.

"We are ecstatic to be back open and a part of the community again," said Joe Thorne, general manager of the store. "It has been a long, long time."

The fresh produce section -- the Arctic Room -- is now a new walk-in section of the store. The Beer Cave, another walk-in cooler, offers up the coldest cases of beer on St. Thomas, Mr. Thorne said. The bakery and deli counter have a larger selection of local recipes. Mr. Thorne said the new and improved Cost U Less employs about 150 people - 75% of whom are pre-storm employees.

Cost U Less is owned by The North West Company International, a Canadian company that operates club-style stores in the Virgin Islands, Hawaii, north and west Canada, rural Alaska, the South Pacific islands and elsewhere in the Caribbean. According to North West, it is a leading retailer to underserved rural and urban communities.